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ABSTRACT

The documents and articles annotated here offer many suggestions for developing closure criteria, planning, maintaining public and staff goodwill, and finding ways to use or dispose of school facilities. Examination of this material shows that techniques for school closure are not subject to great debate, but that failure to recognize and use them at the proper time can cause greater furor than even the wildest arguments over theory. (Author/IRT)

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TECHNIQUES FOR CLOSING SCHOOLS 8

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TECHNIQUES FOR CLOSING SCHOOLS

There have always been isolated cases in which schools have had to be closed, particularly for reasons of building inadequacy and safety. Only with the rapidly spreading problem of declining enrollment, however, have the intricacies of school closure begun to be systematically examined.

A review of the literature reveals that school closure often causes more difficulties than it resolves. Especially by those who have experienced it, closure is recommended only as a last resort; unfortunately, it cannot always be avoided.

If school closure is to be attempted, it should be done carefully and methodically, with sufficient time taken to understand the unique local problems and to develop techniques adequate to meet them. An awareness of the experiences and conclusions of others can help disclose the magnitude of the undertaking in all its dimensions and implications. Still, the literature can indicate only how to look at the problem and can never completely define what the problem is, since it varies so markedly from district to district.

Andrews, Soder, and Eismann's research suggests that few school districts actually examine the full range of criteria that can be considered when deciding which schools to close. Pressure for school closure usually comes from a few well-defined sources, such as the requirements of a desegregation plan or the outmigration of population from an industrializing neighborhood. Too often the effects of closing the school in question are not considered or the adequacy of the buildings being kept open is not taken into account, so urgently do the current problems cry for attention.

In Hayward, California, the too-rapid closure of two schools led eventually to court battles. More

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thorough planning and improved public relations efforts made the subsequent closure of two additional schools relatively painless. Numerous suggestions in the areas of both planning methods and public relations techniques are found in the literature.

Plans should be comprehensive enough to encompass more issues than simply that of school closure. Where the district is, where it is going, and how it is to get there must be continually reviewed in light of the ever-changing situation. Planning must be flexible enough to allow a number of solutions to current problems, with a justifiable choice for the solution preferred. Sargent and Handy in particular convincingly argue the case for planning.

Communicating with and involving the public in any school closure decision is as much a necessity as is adequate planning. Emotional attachments to the school, as well as the personal relationships many parents have spent years cultivating with the school's staff, are often treated with less concern than are financial and logistical considerations. Yet without the emotional acceptance of closure on the parts of parents, students, faculty, and staff, how can administrators even hope to win backing and support for the move? The intelligent use of media, the recruitment of active and vocal parents for task forces, and open, honest access to the facts, coupled with adequate time for the idea to be accepted, can go a long way toward assuring a successful effort.

Once closed, the school facility is available for many purposes within the district or can be disposed of in any of several ways. The first consideration is always for maintaining or improving the educational standards of the district. New space can allow new programs and expansion of services as far as budgetary restrictions permit. Even if closed facilities cannot be used immediately, it is important to realize that population shifts or renewed growth could revive a need for the school in the future.

Permanent disposal of an adequate building is most often avoided by leasing, especially to government and community agencies, though other arrangements can be made as well. Vandalism and continued maintenance costs make simple mothballing less attractive. If a school is to be leased or sold, the commercial possibilities of the facility should be considered along with other criteria when selecting the school to be closed. Legal restrictions on the disposal of public buildings are another factor in finding the best alternative.

The documents and articles listed below offer many suggestions for developing closure criteria, planning, maintaining public and staff goodwill, and finding ways to use or dispose of school facilities. Examination of this material will show that techniques for school closure are not subject to great debate, but failure to recognize and use them at the proper time could cause greater furor than even the wildest arguments over theory.

Andrews, Richard L.; Soder, Roger; and Eismann, Donald A. "The Environmental Impact of School Closures." 1974. 45 pages. ED 112 521.

To gain information on the effects of school closure, the authors of this report contacted 60 school districts discussed in *Fewer Pupils/Surplus Space* (by Sargent and Handy, abstracted below) for a followup telephone survey. The data gathered are divided into five categories.

First, the criteria used to decide on school closure are listed by district and then prioritized as to the frequency with which each was chosen. Second, district attitudes toward optimum school size were contrasted and then compared to attitudes revealed in a review of the literature (which forms an appendix). Third, of the 49 districts that closed schools, 33 estimated savings that would result from closure. Twelve districts sought to determine if savings were realized, but of these only four measured actual savings. These figures are presented in a table.

Fourth, it was found that one-third of the schools closed were leased (primarily to government agencies), one-fourth were offered for sale, and another fourth used for other school district purposes, with the remainder disposed of in other ways. Fifth, only 4 of the 49 districts conducted formal followup studies of the impact of school closure on the surrounding environment. Three of these were negative, as were the majority of the informal assessments also offered by district contacts.

What could have been a very interesting study is marred by the imprecision of the data. How responses were generated is unclear. More importantly, the factual information compiled by the districts surveyed is not complete enough for conclusions to be drawn, nor is it comparable from district to district. Most of the information provided by the districts is subjective, and the degree to which it is biased or slanted cannot be determined. Despite the many tables and analyses presented, the conclusion of the report states little more than that closure is a simple solution that leads to more complex and costly problems.

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Arveson, Raymond G. "Implications of Decreasing Student Enrollments." Paper presented at American Association of School Administrators annual convention, Atlantic City,

February 1974. 4 pages. ED 087 120.

The superintendent of the Unified School District in Hayward, California, briefly discusses several ramifications of declining enrollment before turning to school closing in particular. Great public relations difficulties, including a court case, made the closing of the first two of four Hayward elementary schools painful, and techniques were revised for the second pair.

The following steps were incorporated in the new plan: adequate initial communication, time for study and planning, public announcement of tentative recommendations, public hearings at the school sites and before the board, well-defined orientation and transitional plans, and "a humane and understanding approach to the process."

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Beck, Wesley W., Jr. "Everybody Got into the Act When Blackwell Closed a School." *American School Board Journal*, 163, 6 (June 1976), pp. 35, 46. EJ number not yet assigned.

This short but clear article describes a successful school closure obtained in one district thanks primarily to careful planning and a classic task force approach. Substantial savings and a popularly approved kindergarten and special education center were the positive results achieved when one of four elementary schools was consolidated with the other three.

Brody, Judith A. "How to Close a School and Not Tear Your Community Apart in the Process." *American School Board Journal*, 163, 6 (June 1976), pp. 31-35. EJ number not yet assigned.

Many see the closing of schools due to enrollment decline as signalling the dying of the community and are unwilling to accept the necessity for closure. To combat such negative attitudes, school officials must believe that enrollment decline provides great opportunities for revitalizing the educational program and must communicate this belief to the public.

Planning is very important to any attempt at a smooth closure process, though in many cases obtaining accurate data may be time-consuming and difficult. Involving the local citizenry is also necessary to a successful closing, but how soon such involvement should occur and where it should focus depend on the local community. Sensitivity to all the groups involved and recognition of the emotional depth of the issue are the basic lubricants for reducing friction in the machinery of closure.

Observations by officials at state and local levels and illustrations of the successes and difficulties in actual closures make Brody's point clear, though the solutions she offers are of necessity general in nature.

Department of the Interior. *Intermountain Evaluation Task Force. A Report.* Albuquerque, New Mexico: Bureau of Indian Affairs, 1973. 147 pages. ED 077 625.

This case study presents a well-documented example of a task force in action. In this specific and rather specialized instance, the school to be closed was the Intermountain School for Navajo youth, one of many Off-Reservation Boarding Schools operated by the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA). The task force was charged with examining the possibility of using the facility for youngsters from other tribes, for postsecondary education for Indians, and for purposes outside BIA jurisdiction.

The task force report analyzes the condition of the facility, the need for such a facility, and possible alternative uses to which the facility could be put. Thorough appendixes present reports on the different aspects of the study supporting the conclusions presented in the text. The study serves as a model for the kinds of details that must be considered in closing a school and for exploring a broad range of alternatives before making a commitment to any program.

Order from EDRS. MF $0.83 HC $7.35. Specify ED number.

Educational Facilities Laboratories. *Schoolhouse. A Newsletter from Educational Facilities Laboratories, No. 21.* New York: 1975. 9 pages. ED 112 458.

This newsletter consists primarily of a report on the "extensive experience in the use of school space for other community purposes" of Arlington, Virginia. Due to enrollment decline, 12 buildings have been partly or fully reprogrammed from school to community use since 1958.

The offerings in both partly and fully closed schools include preschool centers, kindergartens, senior citizens' centers, lunch programs, vocational and adult education, a museum, police aide programs, recreational offerings, clinics, community theater groups, and other activities.

One building found no longer usable was demolished, and another was sold to a private agency and thus returned to the tax rolls. Assistant Superintendent Ringers notes that "the key in all cases is to gain or maintain community values."

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Eisenberger, Katherine E. "Closing a School: Some Ways to Ease the Trauma." *School Management*, 18, 7 (August/September 1974), pp. 33-36. EJ 104 112.

In order to close a school with the least public opposition, school administrators must realize that the most important problems they face are "people problems" rather than "nuts-and-bolts problems." Parents who fight for the budget are loyal to their local school, not to the district. Parents invest a great deal of themselves in their schools and achieve a certain place in the community, which school closing threatens. Teachers have established personal relationships and are settled in the routine of their schools, and sudden shifts can be difficult. Principals and other individual school administrators lose contact with the staff, parents, and students whom they have developed into a working unit, and are faced with rebuilding all these relationships. Coping with these "people problems" means establishing communication with everyone involved.

Surveys seeking community, faculty, staff, and student attitudes help administrators pinpoint the greatest concerns of these groups. Coffee klatches can provide an informal setting in which school personnel and parents can effectively communicate their responses to such concerns. School visitation programs can acquaint teachers and students across the district with the benefits offered by other schools and provide the first interpersonal contacts.

Simulation exercises and case studies allow administrators and board members to confront the problems intellectually and come to mutual understandings that can reduce emotions and tensions when the real thing must be faced. Task forces provide a positive outlet for active community members who might otherwise be waging a divisive defensive campaign.

Eisenberger, Katherine E. "How to Prepare the Public for the Closing of a Neighborhood School." *American School Board Journal*, 162, 6 (June 1975), pp. 42-45. EJ 119 212.

Open, honest, and thorough communication with all segments of the community can ease public concern about the closing of schools. Eisenberger suggests five techniques for communicating with and involving the public, giving examples of each.

Pack, Kenneth, and **Weiss, Edmond H.** "And Specifically, How to Make Productive Use out of All That Yawning Space." *American School Board Journal*, 162, 6 (June 1975), pp. 44-45. EJ 119 213.

Pack and Weiss briefly offer several alternatives for disposing of part or all of a school to several types of agencies, including approaches requiring renovation or demolition of the building.

Parker, Jack. "One Old Schoolhouse Refuses to Die." *School Management*, 18, 3 (March 1974), pp. 34-35. EJ 094 566.

A program supported mutually by the Lehigh County Vocational Technical School and a local nonprofit citizens' group has allowed a closed school building to become a practical laboratory in construction techniques for students with school adjustment problems. In the process of transforming the old building into low-cost apartments for disadvantaged families, the students gain knowledge, pride, and motivation, which are reflected in substantially decreased withdrawal and absentee rates and substantially higher goal accomplishment levels.

Sargent, Cyril G., and **Handy, Judith.** *Fewer Pupils/Surplus Space. A Report.* New York: Educational Facilities Laboratories, 1974. 55 pages. ED 093 046.

Probably the most comprehensive document listed in these references, this report provides substantial backgrounding in population and enrollment trends, including the strong effects of American mobility, before focusing on the school closings that these trends force in many locations.

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Sargent and Handy discuss the options available for using surplus space, particularly in the closed school. Educational possibilities include special programs, alternative and continuing education, administrative services, experimental projects, and the provision of facilities for students temporarily displaced for remodeling or other short-term reasons. Local government departments of health and recreation can use closed schools, and community centers can be developed with local government assistance. Descriptions of renting, trading, and sales alternatives cover disposal to private agencies, with legal restrictions noted in a following section. Interdistrict and regional planning can make any or all of these determinations easier to reach and more valuable as well.

Sargent and Handy carefully guide the reader to an understanding of the need for planning, what data are important, and how to obtain the data (including how to get special aids from public agencies). They also describe ways to determine what additional costs or savings will result from enrollment drops and school closure.

Keeping school closing a smooth process requires adequate communication. When to present the facts, how and why to involve the community, the need to provide options, methods for handling community surveys and public hearings, and how to develop and use a task force make up the most important communications questions dealt with by Sargent and Handy.

The report concludes with a listing of information sources of all types where the reader can obtain further details on the items covered.

Order copies from Educational Facilities Laboratories, Inc., 850 Third Avenue, New York, New York 10022. $4.00.
Also available from EDRS. MF $0.83 HC $3.50. Specify ED number.

Sieradski, Karen. *Implications of Declining Enrollments for Schools. NAESP School Leadership Digest, Second Series, Number 4. ERIC/CEM Research Analysis Series, Number*

Charles Barrett Kindergarten, Vosbeck-Vosbeck-Kendrick-Redinger, Architects. Photo by J. Alexander

19. Eugene, and Washington, D.C.: ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management, University of Oregon; and National Association of Elementary School Principals, 1975. 32 pages. ED 114 906.

Sieradski reviews information on enrollment forecasting (indicators to look for, where to find methods and models, and how special interest groups can bias forecasts) and advance planning (how to shift pupils, reduce programs, cope with stable or growing costs, and cut back personnel) before discussing school closure directly.

When closure is decided on, she emphasizes that the district should obtain good will toward closure from everyone affected. Concerns of parents, teachers, and students with their "reputation, influence and acceptance" in the community and the schools must be sought out and listened to. Visitation programs are one helpful tool for teachers, students, and administrators. Task forces involving active and vocal parents serve as special advisory councils to the school board and provide information to the public and the media. Task force duties include studying enrollment forecasting procedures, visiting and rating each school for educational adequacy, establishing closing criteria, and recommending schools for closure. Sieradski provides a scenario showing how all these elements combine in the process of school closing.

She discusses alternatives to closure, as well as ways of disposing of closed schools. Lending buildings to community groups or public agencies, perhaps in return for maintenance costs, keeps the schools available for later use, as does leasing to a neighboring district, government body, university, or other agency. Selling is generally regarded as a last resort, but one that can provide financial benefits in the right situation.

Order copies from National Association of Elementary School Principals, 1801 North Moore Street, Arlington, Virginia 22209. $2.50.
Also available from EDRS. MF $0.83 HC $2.06. Specify ED number.

[Thomas, Donald]. "Declining School Enrollments." Salt Lake City: Salt Lake City School District, [1975]. 16 pages. ED 117 832.

As superintendent of Salt Lake City School District, which has suffered one of the most rapidly declining enrollments in the nation, Thomas has faced school closure problems at a severe level. He offers an outline of the plan and process developed and followed in this district for closing schools effectively while minimizing community conflict, preserving board of education credibility, and developing community consensus.

In addition, Thomas lists the "bread and butter" issues facing the superintendent and the board of education: reduction of school staffs, utilization or sale of surplus space, conservation of money, increases in transportation services, and procurement of support for board decisions. An outline of the Salt Lake City plan to implement board decisions swiftly and a list of special services to be provided for displaced students and parents are also included as possible models.

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"What to Do If Shrinking Enrollment Forces You to Shut a School." *Nation's Schools*, 91, 2 (February 1973), pp. 12-13. EJ 069 123.

In a brief glance at several aspects of school closure, as seen in a few hard-hit California districts, this article serves as an introduction to the topic. Noting possible major drawbacks to selling vacant schools, the article suggests leasing as one alternative, and conversion of the building or change in districtwide facility use patterns as others.

The need for making school closings as painless as possible is mentioned in a brief account of the experience of Hayward's schools. Communication with parents, the presentation of options at public hearings, and school visitation programs were used to smooth the way.

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